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FM USMISSION USUN NEW YORK  
TO RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 0497  
RUEHVN/AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE PRIORITY 0021  
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8107  
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1940

C O N F I D E N T I A L USUN NEW YORK 000374

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DEPT FOR PRM-RGRENNE; EAP/BCLTV-JWEYER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/23/2016

TAGS: PHUM PREF UNICEF LA TH

SUBJECT: HMONG CHILDREN: UNICEF HITS IMPASSE

REF: A. VIENTIANE 179 AND PREVIOUS

¶B. STATE 24364

Classified By: AMB. A WOLFF, U.S. DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE TO THE UNITED NATIONS, FOR REASONS 1.4 B/D

¶11. (C) Summary: USUN econoffs met February 23 with UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Kul Gautam to review ways to break the current impasse over reunification of 27 Hmong refugee children incarcerated in Laos whose parents remain in Thailand (reftels). Gautam noted there would be no movement without a gesture from the RTG, which had broken its own laws in expelling the Hmong children. He also suggested that an assurance to the GOT that the Hmong refugees could be resettled in a third country might move both sides towards resolving the political problem that lies at the root of this humanitarian issue. End summary.

UNICEF CONVERSATION WITH LAOS

¶12. (C) UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Kul Gautam, who previously has served in high-level UN capacities in both Bangkok and Vientiane, told Econoffs that in his separate February 17 meetings with the Laotian and Thai PermReps, he found the Laotian well-informed about the Hmong children, whereas the Thai PermRep was only "vaguely aware" of the situation. PermRep Kittikhoun of Laos "vented frustration" to Gautam about what Laos saw as unfair and one-sided criticism, particularly from the U.S. Spouting the "party line" that the GOL was trying to find the children, Kittikhoun complained about lack of official notification of the children's deportation from Thailand. He claimed that the Thai ambassador in Vientiane had not provided details to the Lao Foreign Ministry when asked. According to Gautam, Kittikhoun would appreciate UNICEF efforts to get the RTG to provide the details on where, when, how and who, exactly, were sent to Laos. Kittikhoun claimed that "not even the Americans" had provided those details. Gautam told us he stressed to Kittikhoun that "no one will win" if the situation remains unresolved.

UNICEF CONVERSATION WITH THAILAND

¶13. (C) Recalling his conversation with Thai PermRep Laoaphan, Gautam said she declared that Hmong who were illegally in Thailand would face consequences if they did not "follow the rules." Gautam countered that the Thai Child Act of 2003 required proper treatment of children, regardless of their ethnic background. He told Laoaphan that the RTG had violated its own laws by holding the children in detention for more than 48 hours and expelling these minors. Thai actions, he told her, are also inconsistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC), and pointed out that a Thai minister recently assured the CROC treaty body in

Geneva of the RTG's proper and equitable treatment of all children. Laohaphan, whom Gautam characterized as poorly briefed on the situation, took this on board with some consternation.

#### FEW WAYS FORWARD

¶4. (C) Gautam confided to Econoffs that Thailand, as a democracy, is concerned with its image and needs to live up to a higher standard. He suggested that the launch of an RTG investigation into the illegal expulsion of the 27 Hmong children might be enough to put the ball back into Laos' court. He further mused that well-respected Thai human rights activists might discreetly put pressure on the RTG to work out this problem with the GOL. Gautam posited that a third-country promise to resettle the Hmong families might help move the RTG to act.

¶5. (C) Econoff noted that she had orally briefed UNICEF officials on precisely the information the Laotians claimed not to have, drawing from Vientiane's suggested demarche points of February 3. Gautam stated he was not in a position to share such details with the Lao PermRep, as Laos would be suspicious of any information coming from the U.S. UNICEF would be willing to act as a broker and convey any information to the GOL received from the RTG, using it as leverage to get the GOL to "find" the children. The UN Country Team in Bangkok may consult with Embassy Bangkok on the best way to approach the GOT to obtain information that might move the GOL out of this impasse.

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